

Food & Nutrition



Medically reviewed by George Krucik, MD, MBA — By Christine Case-Lo —
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Smart nutrition and food choices can help prevent disease. Eating the right foods can help your body cope more successfully with an ongoing illness.

Food & Nutrition Overview

The effective management of food intake and nutrition are both key to good health. Understanding good nutrition and paying attention to what you eat can help you maintain or improve your health.

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What Is Good Nutrition?

Food and nutrition are the way that we get fuel, providing energy for our

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and carbohydrates are all required. Maintaining key vitamins and minerals

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possible dietary supplements.

A healthy diet includes a lot of natural foods. A sizeable portion of a healthy diet should consist of fruits and vegetables, especially ones that are red, orange, or dark green. Whole grains, such as whole wheat and brown rice, should also play a part in your diet. For adults, dairy products should be non-fat or low-fat. Protein can consist of lean meat and poultry, seafood, eggs, beans, legumes, and soy products such as tofu, as well as unsalted seeds and nuts.

Good nutrition also involves avoiding certain kinds of foods. Sodium is used heavily in processed foods and is dangerous for people with high blood pressure. The USDA advises adults to consume less than 300 milligrams (mg) per day of cholesterol (found in meat and full-fat dairy products among others). Fried food, solid fats, and trans fats found in margarine and processed foods can be harmful to heart health. Refined grains (white flour, white rice) and refined sugar (table sugar, high fructose corn syrup) are also bad for long-term health, especially in people with diabetes. Alcohol can be dangerous to health in amounts more than one serving per day for a woman and two per day for a man.

There are many high-quality, free guidelines available for healthy eating plans that give more details on portion size, total calorie consumption, what to eat more of, and what to eat less of to get healthy and stay that way.



Nutritional Deficiencies

Even if you are getting enough to eat, if you are not eating a balanced diet, you may still be at risk for certain [nutritional deficiencies](#). Also, you may have nutritional deficiencies due to certain health or life conditions, such as pregnancy, or certain medications you may be taking, such as high blood pressure medications. People who have had intestinal diseases or had sections of intestines removed due to disease or weight loss surgery also may be at risk for [vitamin deficiencies](#). Alcoholics are also at high risk of having nutritional deficiencies.

One of the most common nutritional deficiencies is iron deficiency anemia. Your blood cells need iron in order to supply your body with oxygen, and if you don't have enough iron, your blood will not function properly. Other nutritional deficiencies that can affect your blood cells include low levels of vitamin B12, [folate](#), or [vitamin C](#).

Vitamin D deficiency may affect the health of your bones, making it difficult for you to absorb and use calcium (another mineral that you may not be getting enough of). Although you can get vitamin D by going out in the sun, many people with concerns about skin cancer may end up with low levels of vitamin D by not getting enough sun.

Other nutritional deficiencies include:

- beriberi: low levels of vitamin B1 (found in cereal husks)
- ariboflavinosis: low levels of vitamin B2
- pellagra: low levels of vitamin B3
- paraesthesia: low levels of vitamin B5 leading to a “pins and needles” feeling
- biotin deficiency: low levels of vitamin B7, which can be common in pregnancy

- scurvy: low levels of vitamin C
- rickets: severe vitamin D and/or calcium deficiency
- vitamin K deficiency
- magnesium deficiency: occurs with certain medications and medical problems
- potassium deficiency: occurs with certain medications and medical problems

Eating a balanced diet can help prevent these conditions. Vitamin supplements may be necessary for certain people, such as pregnant or nursing mothers and people with intestinal conditions.

Diseases and Conditions Influenced by Nutrition

Many health conditions are caused and/or affected by food and nutrition. Some are directly caused by food, such as “food poisoning” or bacterial infections from contaminated food. Some people can have severe allergies to foods like peanuts, [shellfish](#), or wheat (celiac disease). Gastrointestinal ailments—such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)—are also directly affected by the consumption of food.

For other diseases and conditions, the type or quantity of food can influence the progress of the disease. Diabetes mellitus, for example, which results in the inability of the body to regulate blood sugar, is drastically affected by the types and quantities of food eaten. Carbohydrate intake has to be carefully monitored if you suffer from diabetes, or blood sugar can rise to dangerous levels. Other conditions affected by food and nutrition include:

- hypertension: Salt intake affects blood pressure.
- heart disease/high cholesterol: Fatty foods and partial hydrogenated oils can create plaque in arteries.
- osteoporosis: Low calcium, low vitamin D and excess fat can result

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- certain cancers: A poor diet and obesity are associated with increased risk of breast, colon, endometrial, esophageal, and kidney cancers.

Your food choices and nutritional status can influence your overall health over the entire course of your life.

Other Considerations

For certain diseases, choosing to eat certain foods and take certain supplements may help you maintain your health.

Patients undergoing cancer treatment may need a specific diet in order to maintain their stamina. For instance, high-calorie foods may need to be consumed to maintain energy. Getting enough calories and protein in the diet can potentially help with long-term survival.

In any case, what you eat can help reduce your health problems. Studies have shown that if you suffer from gout, eating cherries regularly can reduce your chances of a gout attack ([Zhang, 2012](#) ✓). [Garlic](#) may be an effective medicine against certain bacteria and fungi ([Ankri et al., 1999](#)). Honey has antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties (Bogdanov et al., 2008). Consuming apples may actually reduce your risk for colorectal cancer ([Jedrychowski et al., 2009](#) ✓). Additionally, drinking enough water instead of sweet soda or juice can help with weight control, appearance,

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How we reviewed this article:

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Our experts continually monitor the health and wellness space, and we update our articles when new information becomes available.

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Written By

Christine Case-Lo

Edited By

Katrina Chernoff

Medically Reviewed By

George Krucik, MD, MBA

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Written By

Christine Case-Lo

Edited By

Katrina Chernoff

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